

Gender Politics Orientation

Reflections on *Men and Women*

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Relating the articles published in this issue to the content of the original call, this piece will turn to the *gender politics orientation* of the various pieces included. I will locate each of the contributions in a discussion dealing with the kind of orientation which makes up the main section of this article. That discussion will point to the enduring appeal of different feminist approaches, although, as I shall explain, not all contributions are easily appropriated to that outlook. Following on from this, I will discuss the possible significance of one pattern which is detectable in the articles, namely the fact that the conception of patriarchy is unchallenged by the articles collected here. Before approaching those tasks, however, I will provide brief summaries of the articles, grouping them in line with three sets: i) pieces which place emphasis on women, ii) articles equally focused on men and women, iii) contributions more focused on men (though they also illustrate the inseparability of the andro- and gynocentric perspectives).

Men and Women: Article Summaries

Beginning with the first of these categories, in "I am a Girl. Hear me Roar': Girl Power and Postfeminism in Chick lit. jr Novels",

Maria Milson scrutinizes the state of feminism in Meg Cabot's *Airhead* series of novels. Along with other chick lit jr. works, these novels exhibit a certain amount of dividedness in terms of feminist values. Feminism, "girlpower", and postfeminism are employed in her discussion of the works, and her conclusion is that, while the novels draw on the legacy of feminism and bear signs of its influence, it is difficult to see them as powerful feminist testimonies: "feminism", she argues, "stays on the individual plane and never influences society as a whole". In the same grouping, Mads Møller Andersen's piece turns to recent sitcoms focused upon female characters, HBO's *Girls* and Netflix's *Orange Is The New Black*, in particular. Using the concept of the "dramedy", Andersen sets up a contrast between these more recent TV series and earlier ones, such as *Sex in the City*. He explores the extent to which "conventional values" are subverted in the more recent sitcoms. Compared with the imagery of *Sex in the City*, *Girls* and *Orange Is The New Black* present audiences with alternative representations of women, where, for example, women are neither "beautiful" nor gentle towards themselves or others. Third in this category, Lotte Dam's contribution, "'Mother-in-law, my, we know her!': The Role of Personal Pronouns in Constructions of a Female Identity", focuses on the "work personal pronouns do", especially as they contribute to the construction of gender, women in particular. Dam examines texts taken from the Danish-language magazine *ALT for damerne*. The magazine articles, she explains, are characterized by an elaborate deployment of the personal pronouns – almost strategy, one might say – which draws women into the world of the magazine's particular norms and values, where beauty and fashion, for example, dominate. Pronouns are an integral part of the ideology of the magazine, which, even if they seem to exclude the reader from a female group (the magazine's experts), finally inculcate women readers into the broad category of female. Lastly, Joe Goddard turns his attention to Hillary Clinton's 2008 Democratic election campaign and looks forward to her (highly likely) 2016 campaign. Goddard's piece, "Still Waiting for Madame President: Hillary Clinton and the Oval Office", is a very thorough investigation of the manifold (and towering) relevance of gender to a major election and election campaign of this type. In addition to the blatant sexism which characterizes an enormous amount of the ways in which her candidacy was pro-

cessed, gender is also revealed to be a feature which one must factor in when considering high politics, media, voters, and so on.

Turning to the second category, where the focus is more evenly distributed over men and women, Rix focuses on gender in Romantic studies in his piece “New Discussions of Gender in English Romantic Studies”. Of course greater attention to gender within this area of literary studies has brought about a reconceptualization of Romanticism; as Rix, states, the very category “romanticism” as an organic concept has been challenged, especially owing to the fact that new work destabilizes the canon, which traditionally defined the movement. One of Rix’s aims, however, is to do justice to the fact that, in the Romantic period itself, writers found it important to work with the opposition of masculine and feminine, often contrasting sex and gender in their pronouncements about their peers. The second article in this category is Juncker’s “Global Gender”, in which she turns to recent Chinese and Chinese American fiction – the works of Xian-based writer Jia Pingwa as well as Ha Jin and Yiyun Li – and deals with gender issues, drawing inspiration from Foucault amongst others “to uncover hidden network of relations, the interdependencies between men and women with and without power that now await attention”. In what is undoubtedly, the quirkiest contribution to the issue, Kim Ebensgaard Jensen turns to the use of “fuck as a transitive verb” in recent American fiction in his piece, “Representations of Intercourse in American Literature: Gender, Patience and *Fuck* as a Transitive Verb”, which investigates the extent to which women remain the objects in such phrasing. Ebensgaard discovers (unsurprisingly) that it is women who, in a majority of cases, figure as the subject in sentences containing the verb in question, and that, rather than being imbued with “agency”, they are inscribed in terms of “patience” (presented here as the antonym of agency). My own article, which probably belongs here, enquires into what Paglia actually stands for. Employing the religious metaphors of “fallen” and “restored”, as well as the idea of “sacraments”, I argue that what is uppermost in the work of Paglia is a concern with a “fallen state” connected to sex and gender alignment (disempowering for both men and women) and a risen state in which self-fulfilment is effected by transgenderism. For Paglia, the social

purpose of literature is to help individuals understand their own transgender destiny: writers provide models for that “migration”.

The third grouping contains articles which, it is probably fair to say, are more focused on men than women or an even combination of the two sexes. The first of these is Louise Fjordside’s piece, which turns to BBC’s popular *Sherlock* series. Working with Sedgwick’s discussion of love triangles, in which women effectively serve as a barrier between men who feel homosocial love for one another, Fjordside discusses the matrix of relations between Watson, Sherlock and Mary (John Watson’s girlfriend, and then wife). She investigates what the subtext of “performativity” of the text tells us about the men’s feelings for each other, especially Sherlock’s feelings for John. Next in this grouping is Jørgen Riber Christensen’s piece, “The Concept of the Gentleman: PSY’s ‘Gentleman M V’”, which turns to an idea which was once a cornerstone of our key concepts: that of the “gentleman”. Focusing to a significant extent on the satirical nature of the video in question, Christensen argues that it seems to point to the notion that “the insecure status of masculine identity in an age of post-second-generation feminism demands the seemingly parodic treatment of the concept of the gentleman”. Christensen relates his argument to a taxonomy of contemporary masculine identities, arguing that the “gentleman” of the video seems to invoke two of three types. Thirdly, Steen Christiansen turns his attention to Nicolas Winding Refn’s recent critical success *Only God Forgives* in his article “Of Male Bondage: Violence and Constraint in *Only God Forgives*”. The film, he argues, represents part of a rediscovery of melodrama in our times. Whereas classically the melodrama was viewed as film tied in with a female audience (“women’s films”), Refn’s work might be considered an example of “male melodrama”, in which masculinity and its vulnerability are explored. One of Christensen’s main arguments is that even if characters in the story are unable to weep, we should avoid the conclusion that they are bereft of emotional intensity. Violence becomes an outlet for male emotion in the narrative. And, lastly, Bent Sørensen’s article deals with by a 2012 photo spread bearing the title as “Man of the Month” in *Connery*, which featured professor of philosophy at Copenhagen University Vincent F. Hendricks. Sørensen’s analyses the staging of gender and sexuality in the photo series and proceeds to look at

its subsequent critique before proceeding to a consideration of the larger gender debate issues raised by the event. If his article has a male subject, it is also partly focused on the representation of women as sexual objects, and male naivety about this tendency. Sørensen finds inspiration in the work of Bergson on humour and Henri Tajfel's work on ingroup/outgroup dynamics.

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One might discuss these texts in relation to a number of different criteria. One obvious manner in which one might process these texts would involve focussing on their "primary texts" and considering the large number of national contexts included in this collection. Alternatively, one might approach them in terms of the "level of culture" suggested by the primary texts. This angle would lead to observations about the fact that, while some authors focus on literature and engage with a great many canonical authors (Rix in particular), the majority of pieces deal with what we might label mass culture or popular culture. One might also invoke the "theory versus practical criticism" distinction and deal with the fact that most of the contributions represent examples of practical criticism, though they represent examples of cultural studies rather than, say, conventional literature studies.

I have chosen, however, to focus on the *gender politics orientation* suggested by the contributions. In a collection of pieces dedicated to the theme of men and women, it makes sense to approach the contributions in relation to how they orient themselves against the background of today's debates. Turning to the articles again, and reviewing them with an eye for their "men and women" orientation, it is clear that the majority of pieces are informed by different feminist orientations.

- Rix's piece is clearly characterized by a high level of neutrality: he identifies a number of patterns in Romantic scholarship as well as Romantic literature, without siding with any particular position. He does, however, show signs of sympathy for gender criticism (along with post-feminism).
- Nilson's chief sympathy seems to be with Baumgardner and Richards, and their *Manifesta. Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (2000). Postfeminism is tied in with girlpower, and Nilson's

sympathy for Zaslow's and Orenstein's twofold conceptualisations of "girl power" serves to put some distance between her and critics who would find no feminist value in such a theoretical conception. But at the end of her piece, the stress falls on the negative dimension of "girlpower". With the help of the general conclusions of Baumgardner and Richards, who take a less emollient view of such themes, she stresses the fact that there is room for much more feminist content in such books.

- Andersen holds back from identifying with a particular feminist position, but he thinks that feminist strategies are employed in the shows he discusses and takes on the job of "reading" the characters in these shows as signs of progress in female characterization.
- Juncker orients her article in relation to the lives of women and men in "heterotopias" in relation to not just the work of Foucault but also Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Global Woman* (2004), which, as Juncker explains, "problematized the focus the 1960s and 70s feminist movement on Western gender issues and changed the emphasis on white, middle-class men and women to their others in terms of race, class and topography". Her piece, then, is animated by a clear Third Wave approach to issues dealing with women and men.
- Dam's piece is unequivocally social constructionist in its orientation. "This article", she states, "is based on the idea that rather than being reflected in discourse, identity is constructed in discourse". Dam utilizes the insights of discourse analysts and sociolinguistics, social psychology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, as well as the discourse-linguistic approach, in relation to van Dijk, who directs the author to the personal pronoun.
- Fjordside relies on Eve Sedgwick's *English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), as well as on work which evolves out of it. That theory, as we know, looks into a specific (mis)use of women: her focus is situations in which male-male desire is converted into rivalry over a woman, who is not really the beloved, but rather a cover for male-male desire.
- Jensen's work is related to work done in feminist stylistics. Feminist linguistics generally focuses on text produced by genders in the identification of male and female language(s), while Jen-

sen focuses on representations of genders, rather than on gendered discourse as such. But if, as Sara Mills argues, “feminist stylistic analysis is concerned not only to describe sexism in a text, but also to analyse the way in which point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender, to discover whether women’s writing practices can be described, and so on” (Mills 1995, 1), Jensen’s work, focused on agency and transitivity, belongs here. His work can be aligned with Mary Ellen Ryder (1999), who analyses event structures in romance novels which construe heroines as passive, as well as that of Robin Lakoff, who argues that the language produced by women and men signals a view of women as powerless and lacking.

- Goddard scrutinizes the possible significance of gender, and Hillary Clinton’s gender in particular, in the American presidential races in order to discuss the issue in relation to *disadvantage* experienced by Clinton in her political endeavours. He works with a panoply of concepts which allow him to approach the issue from a number of viewpoints and help him to arrive at his conclusion: male and female political roles, (what “types” emerge in a two-gender political arena), the connotations of femininity, societal openness towards a female President, “suitability” (of a female candidate) for office, the significance of gender-plus-age, the “fundamental sexism” detectible in media coverage, and “subliminal attitudes” related to gender.
- And Sørensen’s piece is also explicitly feminist in its orientation. He focuses on sexism and the sexual objectification of women, and, as such, it has its roots in second wave feminism and/or radical feminism and the work of Laura Mulvey, focused on the “male gaze”, in particular. Towards the end of his article, he considers the possible ambiguity of the issue: “[H]umour also has a liberating potential among the ingroup that laughs along with a humorous representation, so the issue is thorny and not easily resolved”. However, he returns to his second wave feminist orientation. We can thank feminists, he states, for “calling foul on sexist practices inside and outside the academe”.

To provide a characterization of the orientation of the remaining pieces, it is necessary to bring men and masculinity into the fore-

ground. The articles I have already discussed contain a rather modest amount of censure of men and reproof of masculinity. Rix's piece, which engages with gender criticism, re-articulates opprobrium of masculinity and even men. Romantic studies gender criticism focuses, he explains, on a *crisis* in masculinity ("male power is torn by anxieties about its authority"), as well as men's (somewhat nervous) attempts to shore up patriarchy ("analysis may reveal how male writers struggle to maintain patriarchal values rather than presume that they are part of a god-ordained and static universal order"). Sørensen's article is more trenchant in its criticisms. His criticism is of one man, but he is clearly interested in *systemic* sexism, as well as institutional bias.

What is striking about the two remaining articles in terms of their gender orientation is that, in contrast to any discourse characterized by censure of men or reproof of masculinity, these pieces are more sympathetic towards men and masculinity. Christensen's article pulls back from Genz and Barbon's "postfeminist" man, which some feminists might see as being rather uncritical of certain masculinities, but he deals sympathetically with an array of male identities. His conclusion is more descriptive than evaluative (or emotive): "Gentleman M V" has managed to produce a new kind of gentleman that reflects the ongoing negotiation of different male, social identities". And Christiansen's piece, going one step beyond this, is full of sympathy for the *difficulties* faced by men in society, indeed their vulnerability. He is partly interested in how, in Refn's *Only God Forgives*, "pleasure, fear, and pain are primarily embodied in and through *male* bodies" (my emphasis). The film, he argues, "places the strong, violent male protagonist in a disempowered position", and the implied audience, an audience of men, are put in a "passive-masochistic position rarely delegated to men." In his summing up remarks, Christiansen speaks of how the end point of masculinity is "as crippling for men as for anyone else", and "men are as much victims of patriarchal violence as women are".

Patriarchy: An Organic Concept?

In the original call for articles, I state that "One commentator has published a study suggestively entitled *The Second Sexism*, detailing the gender-specific issues which affect men rather than women (David Benatar)", and I go on suggest the importance of "the

burgeoning and persistence of the Men's Movement in the works of authors such as Robert Bly, Warren Farrell, et al., concomitant with the achievement of high standards of living for (some) women in Western societies". Something of an attempted revolution has started to take place in gender studies. Offering a challenge to the wide variety of positions employed in the past few decades, much recent work has started to critique the consensus surrounding the nature of the gender *arche* (Ancient Greek: ἀρχή). Typically, such thinking, like much feminist thinking, is against all *arche* on the prescriptive level, but on the descriptive level it challenges the notion that the conception of "patriarchy" is fit for purpose if our first objective is to describe the matrix of relations between men and women in societies today. When we turn to the work of a thinker such as Christina Hoff Sommers, for example, societal "patriarchy" in, for example, the United States, becomes an assumption which needs to be subject to scrutiny. Work such as hers or Warren Farrell's or David Benatar's, for example, challenges the descriptive dimension of the virtually all academic work dedicated to men and women.

There are at least two views on work such as that of Benatar's if we may take him as the vanguard of this challenge. On the one hand, it might be thought of as work generating a paradigm shift in gender studies. At the same time, it may be seen unsympathetically as the false article and work which changes nothing in terms of the number of positions on gender available to us. Of course the notion that some inequalities may be inequalities affecting men is a troublesome idea for traditional discourses about gender inequality. The very notion of patriarchy relies upon the notion that women are *systematically* disadvantaged in society, and that any inequality facing men is so limited in nature that it makes sense to go on speaking of a general *arche* in society. As one might have imagined, then, a number of feminists have sought to "read" problems faced by men in society not as indicators of inequalities challenging the organic nature of the conception of patriarchy, but, rather, as problems which are in fact *causally related to* patriarchy. Showing signs of nervousness, Julie Bindel gets this point across in a *Guardian* article written by Elizabeth Day about David Benatar's *The Second Sexism*:

"It's total and utter bullshit. There are areas where men are paying the price that male supremacy gives them – there's

absolutely no doubt about that.... The reality is that the public domain belongs entirely to men and the disadvantages they face are just the price they pay. It's tough cheese". (Day 2012)

The conception of patriarchy is relatively unchallenged in the articles in this issue. In Christiansen's piece, patriarchy is the *cause* of violence, even when the victims are men. (Of course Paglia, the subject of my own piece, boldly states: "What feminism calls patriarchy is simply civilization, an abstract system designed by men but augmented and now co-owned by women" (Paglia 1994, 26). A discussion of Paglia's thinking, however, should not be seen as declaration of general agreement with her views, however intriguing the author finds her.) While only twelve articles are collected in this issue, the fact that the conception of patriarchy remains so crucial to these contributions demands a little reflection, and the first thing to say is that this tendency may well be indicative of the organic nature of the conception and the sound judgment of the contributors. Perhaps "patriarchy" describes with accuracy the present-day state of gender relations in both the developing and developed worlds. As that possibility requires little in the way of elaboration, it might be more interesting to consider an alternative explanation. It might also be argued that the case against the integrity of the conception of patriarchy has not been well made as of yet. If we look back at Bindel's word choice, we see that she distinguishes between "supremacy" and "disadvantage". Such a distinction raises the question "In what does supremacy consist?" Two possible answers suggest themselves. Firstly, "supremacy" may consist in men's experiencing only a tiny fraction of "disadvantage". Secondly, it can be argued that feminist discourses were never about isolated instances of subjugation, but rather deeper realities, which are captured in terms such as "social formations" and "general system" (Meagher, 441). It may well be that writers focused on societal difficulties faced by men will have to meet these points.

Clearly, a great deal of work is going to be done in this area over the next few decades. Commentators such as Benatar are trying, in the first instance, to make gender *arche* in society a moot point. It would be fascinating to repeat the theme of this issue in 2024, and see how things have evolved.

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